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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for improving the employability of bachelor's-level psychology graduates are offered, based in part on practices at Creighton University, Nebraska. One approach is to provide training in specific skills useful in the employment setting, including: biofeedback training; independent study in computer work and a psychology field; practicums with human services agencies; colloquiums that include occupational information and career workshops; information on postgraduate demands in psychology and related disciplines; and videotaping of simulated job interviews between students and faculty. At Creighton, new psychology majors receive brochures covering the program, future study, and employment. A source of information for the brochures was a survey of psychology graduates, which found that about 41 percent of the psychology department's graduates entered the job market immediately following graduation. In addition, Creighton's formal advising system, counseling center, and career development course offered within the psychology department provide career information. In this course, students complete the Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1974) and the System for Career Decision-Making (Harrington and O'Shea, 1980) and conduct an in-depth investigation of a career. Speeches on postgraduate study by psychologists in the field and student practice in simulated job interviews are also included in the course. (SW)

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Increasing the Employability of the Undergraduate Psychology Major

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Paper presented at the meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, April, 1982

Increasing the Employability of the

Undergraduate Psychology Major

As we move into an era of tightened finances, we may find that fewer students are in a financial position to pursue education beyond the undergraduate level. The headlines in recent months have addressed such issues as cutbacks in federally-guaranteed student loans as well as the government sponsored scholarship programs. If we do, in fact, have an increase in the number of our students who will be seeking employment at the bachelor's level, we may also find that the available students will choose those majors which best prepare them for the employment market. Thus, the suggestions which will be raised in this part of our symposium are not only made for the benefit of our students but also have the potential to have an impact on the number of faculty who are needed to continue our currently available programs.

This presentation is not research-based. I want to emphasize prior to beginning my suggestions that I do not have data to support the suggestions which I will make. Rather, I have tried to look carefully at the types of programs which we have tried at Creighton University as well as to search the literature on the teaching of psychology in an attempt to discover what paths others may be taking in this area. My hope is that the suggestions which I raise this morning will lead to some discussion of both the pros and cons of these avenues as well as the provision of additional ideas from the audience and my colleagues on this panel.

One method for increasing the employability of our students

is to provide them with some specific skills which can be used in the employment setting. The student who does not need to be trained during the first few months on the job is a more viable candidate than the one who may have had similar course work but does not possess a marketable skill. To do this type of skill training at the miximal level, it would be helpful to survey employers of bachelor's degree individuals to discover the specific skills which are of interest to them. Such surveys could be done both locally and nationally. We could then determine which of these skills are related to the discipline of psychology. Some of my colleagues may argue that such an approach to the psychology major alters our approach from the liberal arts traditions to a "trade school." My personal belief is that we can achieve a balance between the needs of a broad, liberal arts tradition and a technical training program.

One potential skill which can be taught within the psychology department is biofeedback. Palladino and his colleagues (1981) discussed the position of biofeedback equipment and training within the undergraduate curriculum. Although a considerable portion of their article addresses the equipment involved in starting such a program, they also describe some of the requirements for certification in Michigan as an "Assistant" in biofeedback. This level of certification, according to the article, is both open to and feasible for the undergraduate psychology student. Such titles and formal certification processes may not be available in other states. The skills involved, however, may be useful in obtaining employment in a number of settings. As a guideline, a department might write for a copy of

the Michigan certification standards and then see if they have the facilities or potential to have the equipment to provide comparable training.

Another skill which appears to be marketable at the moment is computer knowledge. Some colleges offer courses in computer language through their math or physics departments. Thus, the role of the psychology advisor may be important in guiding students into such courses. As the mini-computer becomes more financially accessible, a greater number of psychology departments may find that they do have such equipment available within the department. The next question which arises for these departments is whether or not to offer a formal course in computer usage. A number of factors can play a role in this decision. Some universities frown on the same, or highly similar, courses being offered by more than one department. Thus, if the math or physics department already offers such a course psychology is not likely to be permitted to add it to the curriculum even if they argue that it will be taught from a different perspective. Even if a department has the equipment and would be permitted to add a computer course, faculty time can also be an issue. Some faculty have found that they quickly become tied to a specified set of course offerings. These courses tend to be ones which are required for the degree and/or are high demand courses which keep the department census up and thus are not likely to be in a position to add special courses with unknown enrollment potential. Within our department, we have found that we can meet the needs of some of our students through the courses offered by other departments. For those students

who have a strong interest in learning about computer applications specifically as applied to psychology, there is the option of independent study with a specialization in computer work. During one recent semester, we offered our course in advanced experimental psychology as a specific course in computer usage. During this course, the students learned to use the department's Apple II and were writing their own programs by the end of the semester. Such an offering does, however, have limited enrollment and thus does not aid the "census." We tend to use a course like this one as a "trade off" with a large introductory course so that an individual faculty member retains a high student contact ratio for the term. Student evaluation of this type of course has been very positive.

Another area of special skills training is seen in the practicum course offered in many undergraduate psychology departments. In an investigation of 96 students who had participated in an undergraduate practicum course over a 5-year period, Prerost (1981) found that 59% were employed in human services agencies following graduation. Of those psychology majors who did not elect to take the practicum course, only 29% either secured employment in a human services setting or pursued advanced education in a human services discipline. Certainly there is a selection factor operative here. Those students who have an interest in employment or education in the human services seem more likely to enroll in an optional field placement course than those who do not have these interests. On the other hand, it is also possible that such a course and the experience it provides may increase the probability in a tight job market that these former psychology students

will obtain the available human services positions.

Some undergraduate programs have taken the practicum from the level of one course to a special option within the psychology major. Nish (1979) has provided an example of how such a program can be integrated with the traditional psychology major. This "psychology technician training" specialty required that the students take applied, abnormal, testing, testing practicum, personality theory, applied learning, and clinical practicum in addition to the introductory, statistics, and experimental psychology classes which are required of all psychology majors. This major specialty was designed to prepare the students for employment at the bachelor's level in settings where they will be supervised by doctoral level psychologists. These students are still able, however, to take the courses which would be needed should they later decide to pursue graduate study in psychology. Several of the advantages which Nish reported for his program are applicable to my topic for today. First, he has found that this program has increased the employment potential for those psychology students who are capable of handling the course load required but are not, for a variety of reasons, planning to pursue graduate education. Second, for some students, this program has actually provided an avenue for funding future graduate education. Some of the agencies which have interacted with these practicum students do have limited funds for graduate education sponsorship with the agreement that the student will be employed at that agency for a specified time following graduation. Thus, if a major obstacle for the student in terms of further education is a

financial one, such an option may provide the necessary means for continuing education either shortly after completion of the undergraduate program through sponsorship or later as a result of the savings accrued while working in a related setting. Nish also raises the issue of the practicum and technician training program having the potential to improve the interactions between psychology faculty and other psychologists within the community. I have found this to be true of our one-course practicum. There are several benefits which the undergraduates receive from this improved interaction. Although we continue to hear about decreased enrollment, many psychology departments still seem to be having more students want their courses than they are able to accommodate with the current full-time faculty. An option used by many institutions is to employ part-time faculty to teach additional sections of courses or even offer specialty courses. We have been able to broaden our sphere of part-time faculty as a result of psychologists encountered through the field placement course. Once community psychologists become aware of the interest which many undergraduates show in the practice of the profession, it is also easier to ask these same psychologists to give talks to such student groups as Psychology Club or Psi Chi. Through these talks, the students get a broader picture than they might have from their textbooks about the working psychologist.

Information regarding the range of careers possible to the person with a bachelor's degree in psychology can be presented to the students in a number of ways. Periodic workshops on careers for psychology students can be sponsored by the psychology faculty

or be part of the activities of the Psychology Club. Some universities have Career Fairs or Career Day programs. Although it takes a bit of time to participate in such activities, I believe that it can be worth the time to participate.

Career information, on a limited scope, can be transmitted to students through a colloquium series. During the first several years of our undergraduate colloquium series, we emphasized various career avenues which were possible for the psychology student. While some of these careers required the doctoral degree, we tried to illustrate the range of careers which are possible at the subdoctoral level. A complete description of the early years of this series as well as some of the ups and downs of its development can be found in Teaching of Psychology (Ware & Matthews, 1980).

Some students could profit from more than the suggestion that there is a world for those individuals with a bachelor's degree in psychology. More guidance is needed for them. There are several avenues which we have used with these students which I would suggest are helpful. Brochures can be developed to provide the students with at least some basic information to use in formulating questions to ask their advisors. How often we seem to be faced with students who don't even seem to know what questions to ask us! A short pamphlet will not be sufficient to provide answers for the total range of questions asked by our students but in some cases just orienting the student toward the appropriate question may be a major accomplishment. Within our department, we developed a series of three such brochures. These brochures were the result of a

number of intradepartmental conversations and then some extended conversations between two of us. We found that there were certain questions which were frequently asked by our students and for which we felt some written response might be appreciated. Each brochure was designed to address a slightly different area of concern. The three major questions which we considered were: "What can I do with a major in psychology?" "What should I do now that I'm a psychology major." and "What if I want to go to graduate school in psychology?" The first two of these brochures are sent to each new major who is accepted into the department. The brochure on options available to the psychology major is especially relevant to this morning's program. This brochure was based, to a great degree, on the results of a survey of our own graduates. Thus, the data provided tends to be viewed by the readers as applicable to them. We found that approximately 41% of our graduates entered the job market immediately following graduation. The employment setting of these graduates was by no means limited to those places traditionally viewed as the only ones available to psychology graduates. In addition to working in the social services, our graduates were also employed in managerial capacities in a range of settings. Some other occupational fields which did not occur often but were reported included computer programming, secretarial work, filmmaking, public relations, and phlebotamy.

Information on potential careers can also be provided through the formal advising system. Such advising, however, may need to start with making some of your colleagues more aware of

the options which are open to our graduates. After that awareness is reached, a wider range of options may be discussed with psychology majors who do not have the interest or potential to pursue further education. We have found that the student "grapevine" carries information regarding those departments which have advisors who are willing to spend time with students and provide such career information. On more than one occasion, I have had a new advisee state that one reason for choosing psychology as a major was hearing that we take time to help our advisees.

A more structured method of presenting information about employment at the bachelor's level is to make use of the university's counseling center. Such a service may vary from campus to campus in terms of the availability of serious career counseling. We are fortunate at Creighton University to have a Counseling Center staff who are very knowledgeable about not only a range of careers but also assessment devices which can be part of a serious career counseling evaluation. Here, again, the role of the faculty advisor is most important. Some students view the Counseling Center as a facility for those students who have deep psychological difficulties. They are embarassed to call for an appointment. The breadth of the type of services available in such facilities can be pointed out to the student as a means of alleviating some of these reactions.

As an adjunct to those types of services which are provided by our Counseling Center, we have developed a Career Development course within the psychology department. At this time, it is open only to psychology majors although several of its components could

prove quite useful to undergraduates who are not psychology majors. The Creighton course offering is divided into three components. These components were designed to parallel the three basic objectives of the course instructor which are increasing knowledge about one's self, about educational/occupational opportunities, and about occupational implementation skills.

A number of paper and pencil measures are required of the students. These measures are completed as homework assignments and then clarified in individual sessions with the instructor. During the first half of the semester, each student completes the Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1974). The System for Career Decision-Making (Harrington & O'Shea, 1980) is completed later in the semester since the students have, by then, been exposed to many new careers. Based on the results of each of these career search measures, the student is required to conduct an in-depth investigation of a career. Thus, by the end of the course, the student has heard about a number of different careers and has had significant exposure to at least two careers. We have found that many of our students have "tunnel vision" regarding careers. Thus this forced exposure to at least a preferred and an alternative career is a new experience for them. As an aid to this career investigation process, our department has purchased copies of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (1977) and the Occupational Outlook Handbook (1980). The students uses these references in the office as a starting point for their career investigations. To provide a human contact with different careers, the students are required to locate professionals from the community who are employed

in the occupations under investigation. Each student schedules an interview with a professional from two careers during the semester. We have found that the local professional community has been highly cooperative in terms of meeting with our students. During these interviews, the students are expected to learn about the specific daily activities involved in the chosen profession. The students also investigate other aspects of that profession as perceived by their interviewee. They address such topics as perceived pressure in that profession, occupational impact on personal health, and general satisfactions and dissatisfactions which this person associates with the career. Through this process of both active and passive learning, the students have an opportunity to integrate the material which they are receiving. This integration is submitted to the instructor in written form following each interview.

Since some of our students may wish to pursue graduate education either immediately following undergraduate school or at a future time, another component of the course provides specific information on post-graduate demands in both psychology and related disciplines. As the course is currently structured, there are six invited speakers during the semester. Three of these speakers are doctoral level psychologists. The specific individuals vary from one semester to another but are representative of the specialties of clinical, counseling, and industrial-organizational psychology. The other three speakers represent subdoctoral employment possibilities. A major point which the instructor is trying to illustrate here is that graduate training does not <u>have</u> to mean doctoral level education. Typically, these

subdoctoral people represent positions in psychology-type settings, social work, and college student personnel. The course instructor also devotes time to the specific procedures involved in the application for graduate and professional school programs. During one of these class periods, a representative from the pre-law advisory committee and one from the pre-health sciences advisory committee come to the class to address issues specific to each of their areas of expertise. Not only does this presentation provide the students with information regarding these two career paths but also it emphasizes the versatility of the psychology major.

The final component of this course deals with occupational implementation skills. Each student enrolled in the course must participate in a videotaped simulated job interview with the course instructor. An evaluation of the interview is provided and the student is given the option of viewing the taped interview as part of the feedback process. Each student also is required to write a resume of the type which would be submitted to potential employers of the bachelor's level person. Both interviewing skills and resume writing are addressed as part of the course curriculum prior to these exercises.

I have spent more time describing this course than I have some of the other options because I view this course as somewhat unique. It is rather unlikely that many in attendance today had such a course as part of their undergraduate curriculum. We have found that teaching such a course is time-consuming for the faculty member. The format we use necessitates that enrollment be limited. On the other hand, we feel that this course serves a useful function. When we first conceptualized

this course, we felt that it should be taught by a psychologist with a background in counseling and attempted to recruit such a person. Our experience was that graduates of strong counseling psychology programs were not likely to be interested in undergraduate teaching positions. The few candidates we did interest had the background to teach a career development course but not the other courses required of professors in an undergraduate program. Their backgrounds were generally in the field of education and they did not have sufficient preparation to teach survey courses as introductory psychology. Thus, we began to seriously contemplate abandoning the idea of offering such a course. We found, however, that within an integrated department there may be people who are willing to put in extra time to attend workshops and do reading outside their former areas as a form of retraining to meet potential future departmental needs. By providing a semester in which a faculty member had a one course reduction in teaching load so that time would be available for reading and working with our counseling center psychologists on career counseling issues, we were able to overcome what had originally appeared to be an insurmountable problem.

What I have presented today are some ideas which might be used to increase the employability of undergraduate psychology students. Not all options are appropriate to all departments. My personal feeling is that this presentation has merely scratched the surface of those methods which could be tried. Perhaps my major purpose in agreeing to be part of this morning's panel was to try to stimulate thinking and discussion of a topic which I find is "near and dear" to my heart. I hope that it has served that purpose.

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